

Making It Happen - Here's How

For many years, [Sylvie Béliveau](#) has been travelling the developing world, bringing the sport of football (soccer) to countless women as an instructor in coach education with FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association). The importance of this initiative, and Sylvie's role in it, cannot be overstated. Opportunities to play and compete are generally taken for granted in Canadian society, although it is undeniable that inequities do exist. Nevertheless, they pale in comparison to inequities in many other parts of the world where sport for women is restricted or non-existent because it is culturally unacceptable or is deemed a male-only domain. As its mission statement makes clear, FIFA has acknowledged sport as a powerful tool in "overcoming social and cultural obstacles ... with the ultimate aim of improving women's standing in society." The [Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching](#) is indebted to Sylvie for chronicling her experiences for our readers. In an increasingly pessimistic environment, too little is known about the contributions of coaches such as she who understand sport's potential as an instrument of positive change, who are deeply committed, and who give unstintingly of their expertise to help improve the lives of women through sport.



Sylvie at the FIFA Futuro III course in Cape Verde in November - December 2005

Sylvie also relates her inspiring journey from top player to national coach, an experience that influenced her commitment to "giving back". While not every woman coach can, or should, aspire to the national and international arenas and playing fields, the beauty of Sylvie's learnings is that they can be applied at all levels of the coaching spectrum. – Sheila Robertson

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JULY 2008 FEATURE

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by Sylvie Béliveau

From athlete to coach

In common with many women of my generation, as a young person I dreamed of being in a structured sport. I wanted to be on a team and take part in competitions, guided by a coach. Having inherited a rich skill-set from my family, I was confident about what I could accomplish.

When the opportunity presented itself, I took it, and at an early age I experienced success by winning gold in 1978 at the first Canadian Soccer Championship for U-16 girls. Right then, I hoped it would be possible to go further—that there was another level for us to strive for, perhaps a provincial team made up of all the best players in Quebec, or a World Cup, but neither existed.

I clearly remember thinking to myself, “If there is no Quebec team for us, then I will create one for the next generation of players.” It was the farthest thing from my mind that only eight years later, in 1986, the first Quebec team would be assembled and I would have the privilege of putting it together.

Of course, I didn't get to coach at the Quebec team level just like that, without prior training. I played until I turned 19 and had won another Canadian championship in 1981 with the U-18 team.

But the fact is that by the time I reached the senior level as a player, I found myself again on the sidelines, with not enough players interested in pushing on, so the team fell apart. It was then that I was approached by head coach **Céline Daigle** to be the assistant coach of my club's junior team, made up of women only one year younger than I was. Because I was a goalkeeper and there were few goalie coaches, I was asked to lend a hand.

It was a great introduction to coaching, and it was also good because there wasn't the pressure of being responsible for an entire group of players. I felt comfortable and, at the same time, I was able to learn coaching tasks from the sidelines.

Céline had to leave the province at midseason so I was the only option. Still very young, I took over the coaching duties and, thanks to the work done by her, I led the junior team to provincial victory and then on to the Eastern Canadian Championship. In the years that followed, there were many more successes, and I have never left coaching.

I was highly committed and never turned away a challenge, coaching one and then two teams every year, combining a club team with a college team, going to provincial championships every two years. Also, I did not hesitate to go back to playing when new opportunities arose. Thus, when the first provincial selections were made in 1986 to compete in the first-ever National Women All-Star Championship, where we, as the Quebec team, finished second to Ontario, I had accumulated considerable experience coaching U-18 and senior teams.

My role as head coach of the Quebec senior women's team soon resulted in my being offered the assistant coaching job with the national women's team. (I note here the warm welcome and open mind of the national team coach, **Neil Turnbull**, without whose support my career could have ended a lot sooner.)



Sylvie (second from right) conducting the FIFA Member Association course in Algeria in March 2008

With my limited knowledge of English, this open door to the national team required considerable effort on my part to learn the language, without which I would not have survived very long. I agreed to move to Edmonton to become bilingual quickly. I now use both languages quite a lot, both in training and in competitions.

For five years, until 1991, I was assistant coach of the national team. Then I took on the head coaching duties from 1991 to 1996, when Canada qualified for the first time for the World Cup that took place in Sweden. We ended the competition in 10th place and earned Canada's first point with a draw against Nigeria.

After the team narrowly missed qualifying for the 1996 Olympic Games - the World Cup served as the qualifying event for the Olympic Games - I thought it would be wise to take a breather from coaching. At the time, my ambitions focused not only on the advancement of women's soccer; I also wanted children. Yet I couldn't see myself having children while coaching a national team, so I resigned. But when my first child, **Charles-Éric**, was born, I went back to coaching, this time with the McGill University women's team. This was enough of a commitment to keep me active while devoting the time required to my child.

International instructor - saying "yes" to opportunities

After the birth of my second son, **Gabriel**, in 1998, I accepted the Canadian Soccer Association's (CSA's) nomination to FIFA as a women's football instructor. I received my first international assignment in February 1999. I was to be assistant coach for the first selection against the reigning world champions from the United States at the draw for the third Women's World Cup in February 1999 in San José, California.

At that time, I was still breastfeeding and had every reason to turn down the offer, but I decided to contact FIFA and tell them that I would accept, but that I was going to bring along my baby. The managers of the time not only agreed but offered to change the competition site I would be assigned for the World Cup so that I could be closer to my family. My family was thus able to join me for two of the three weeks of my stay in the United States as a member of the Technical Study Group for the World Cup. I found that first assignment quite stressful. It was not easy to combine coaching with family responsibilities. However, I have no regrets and, with time, I have learned to appreciate not only the duties but all my abilities to do the job. As women, we often want to be at the top, even in our debut, but time is needed to adapt to a new task and we must give ourselves the chance to evolve and become comfortable in each new environment.



Sylvie leading a classroom session in Cape Verde in November 2005

After that, I was given further assignments to train coaches and participate in international competitions, all key to building the confidence that enables me to give back to the sport today. It has also taken me to some very interesting countries, including Barbados, Morocco, Thailand, Tunisia, Bahrain, the Republic of Cape Verde (off the western coast of Africa), and Algeria.

Giving back to promote the growth of our sport

Through my years of experience, I learned that the right thing to do was to give back what I had received, and more. If I wanted my sport to survive, I had to do my part. I also applied this principle when I coached the national team: go up against the best opponents to develop as a team, but also play against developing teams to give them the same chance.

But to give something back, one first has to acquire enough experience to develop oneself. The first experiences are for yourself, until you have mastered all the components of the tasks, after which you can concentrate on others.

Preparing the next generation

Through coach education courses, I have met many women who have not yet had the opportunities I have had. And yet along the way, I have realized that nothing can keep us from our dreams, and that many have the same passion for the sport that I do. Many others aspire to operate at the international level. To each and every one, I wish that their dream can come true - for some, to play the game, for others, to coach and follow in my

footsteps to become an international instructor. I always try to give those women the confidence they need to pursue their dreams and achieve their goals.

Serving FIFA and women's football

I have FIFA to thank for enabling me to travel the world, meeting women who want to invest in the growth of our sport. It is a great opportunity to make a difference, because, otherwise, the women have little or no access to a coach education program of any kind, and they crave information, especially about football. Of course, in some countries, even the men lack coach education, but for the women, the situation is even more difficult as they simply have no voice.

“Make the game better, and take it to the world.” Such is the mission of FIFA, which serves 208 member associations through six confederations. It includes 250 million players, of which 40 million are women and young girls, with 99.8% of those being amateurs and 80% being young people. Developing the game and constantly improving it can be accomplished in many ways. One way FIFA does this is by organizing international competitions. FIFA currently holds 12 international competitions for a variety of players, including four for women.



Sylvie (centre) at a Futuro III course in Thailand in November 2004

The first World Cup for men goes back to 1930, while the women's event was inaugurated only in 1991. Opportunities for women to rise to the highest levels are increasing steadily, and FIFA recognizes that it needs this group to encourage the growth of the sport and to achieve excellence.

In addition to holding international competitions, FIFA offers development programs. Its objective is to constantly improve the sport of football and to promote it to the world, while highlighting its unifying, educational, cultural, and humanitarian values, chiefly through development programs and youth programs.

From 1999 to 2006, FIFA increased its development program budget 30 times over the 1975 to 1998 levels. Funds have been contributed chiefly to infrastructure work such as office buildings and football fields and to direct financial assistance to each confederation and member nation in exchange for more sound planning and financial management. It is important to note that 15% of funding must be devoted to women's football and to education programs. In terms of the latter, I was honoured to make a contribution to the achievement of the FIFA objectives.

FIFA stands for inclusion, for football as a sport for everyone

FIFA is clearly committed to assigning women to the various technical study groups at World Cup events for women. This was a major challenge during the initial years of women's international competition, but, today, only women are on such groups.

Since 1999, I have taken part in a number of World Cup events as a member of a technical group, including three Women's World Cups, two World U-20 Championships, the 2004 Olympic Games, and one Arab Nations Cup. Having those years of experience behind me, it is now my duty to contribute to the success of those women who are just starting out, to make their experience a positive one.

Adding to those opportunities to foster improvement in terms of the international standards and to promote the advancement of women's football, I manage coach education, which takes different forms.

Women's Football: Mission and Goals

Mission

FIFA promotes the development of women's football and pledges to support women's football financially and to give women players, coaches, referees, and officials the opportunity to become actively involved in football. FIFA is helping to popularize the game by increasing public awareness and conducting information campaigns as well as overcoming social and cultural obstacles for women with the ultimate aim of improving women's standing in society.

Goals

- To promote and develop women's and girls' football in the member associations
- To improve the infrastructure of women's football in the confederations and member associations
- To increase the proportion of women and girls playing football at the grassroots level, in schools and at amateur and professional levels
- To constantly improve the quality, the organization and the expansion of FIFA women's football competitions
- To create conditions for more women to occupy technical and managerial positions in football, including the domains of refereeing, coaching, medicine, media, and administration
- To organize coaching and training courses for female players, coaches, referees, doctors, and officials
- To establish and publicize a coordinated international match calendar for women's football
- To analyse and monitor technical developments in women's football
- To organize women's football symposia and conferences

Coach education programs

Target groups

I have handled a number of coach education programs to date and experienced a variety of formats.

- Mixed coaching: Sessions are rich in the exchange of information and viewpoints, but a key challenge is to be accepted as a female coaching instructor by the male participants. Once credibility is established, exchanges between men and women in the groups are often rewarding.
- Women-only training: Sessions for women only are a must in countries where women don't enjoy the same benefits as men when it comes to training, and where the culture does not promote mixing of the sexes. These sessions provide a safe environment where women feel at ease to express themselves, but of course they will eventually have to join the system and work with male colleagues. Women who want to excel in coaching must work with male teammates, and we prepare them so that they feel comfortable mixing with the men later on in the program.
- Sessions with male coaches: It is important to take nothing for granted and to know exactly what is required for a successful session. I always hold full discussions with the member association before starting out, which has enabled me to avoid situations where only men were offered the session. When that happens, I suggest that the person in charge recruit former female players, active high-level female players, and women in teaching positions. The minimum that can be accepted in such courses is mixed registration.
- Combining knowledge - female teachers with little football experience and female players without training: In some countries, a mix of knowledge is a good way to make a major contribution. Teachers can not only demonstrate but can also share their teaching knowledge with the players. The players, who know football well, learn to transfer knowledge (communicate) following a model that is based on their environment and their culture. Comfortable with their technical skills, they give back by using those skills to provide a true visual image of the movements being taught by teachers who are less versed in the realities of football. Thanks to this blend of two types of experience, participants can come away with better skills.

Session content

The literature is sparse when it comes to women's football, which means that we have to make a sizable contribution to the creation of documents adapting material intended for men to make it credible for women in football. Since FIFA has been involved in developing women's football through international competitions, a body of information has been assembled that is of use to women football coaches. However, the cultural diversity of the groups involved requires attention to feedback and an open mind in order to adapt content to the real needs of women's football in a given country. Women's football is growing remarkably worldwide, despite the obstacles, especially those that limit development of the sport or the development of women in leadership roles. Differences are notable when comparing everyday life, but interest and commitment are not.

The greatest challenge is to respond to a burning need to take part in the evolution of football in a world where the mentality does not evolve as rapidly when it comes to perceptions and social acceptance.



Participants listening intently to Sylvie at a FIFA Member Association course in Bahrain in June 2005

Taking advantage of my status as a foreigner, I ask more questions, and when the opportunity comes, I share ideas in the hope of changing ways of thinking. I do not pretend to change people, but if one more person can be convinced to open doors for women to express themselves where they want (playing football, coaching), I am satisfied and I know that they will have someone to depend on.

At every opportunity I have had to work with FIFA, and especially in training sessions, I have made it my objective to contribute to influencing at least one woman to seek higher levels. To date, one woman has become a fellow FIFA instructor, another became her national team's assistant coach, and several others have remained active in their organizations.

Conclusion

Here are the principles under which I operate:

- Each assignment is a challenge.
- I always start out knowing that nothing can be taken for granted and that I have to be at my best.
- I give my all, without compromise.
- I respect the people I work with and do not judge them.
- I don't have the secret to success, I simply share my experience, in the hope that each time I will have contributed to the development of women's football worldwide.

And when I come home, I know I have grown.

About the Author



Sylvie Béliveau is the technical director of the Richelieu Yamaska District Soccer Association. She served as a national coach for Community Coaching Development with the CSA from 2004 to 2006. A graduate of the University of Sherbrooke and the National Coaching Institute-Victoria, she has coached teams at all levels, from local clubs to college, university, provincial, and national levels. She was CSA's director of development of women's programs from 1999 to 2003 and was technical director of the Quebec Soccer Federation from 1993 to 1994. Sylvie, who is the president of Égale Action, the Quebec women and sport organization, was inducted into the Canadian Soccer Hall of Fame as a builder. She is also a member of the board of directors of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity and serves on FIFA's Technical and Development Committee.

Recommended Reading

Health and Fitness of the Female Player:

http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/afdeveloping/medical/ffb_gesamt_e_20035.pdf

Bringing Football to the World - Photo Gallery

Thailand - 2004	Thailand - 2004	Thailand - 2004	Thailand - 2004
Thailand - 2004	Thailand - 2004	Cape Verde - 2005	Cape Verde - 2005
Cape Verde - 2005	Cape Verde - 2005	Cape Verde - 2005	Bahrain - 2005
Bahrain - 2005	Bahrain - 2005	Bahrain - 2005	Algeria - 2008
Algeria - 2008	Algeria - 2008	Algeria - 2008	Algeria - 2008